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ABSTRACT

Ways in which the shape and design of curriculum and the direction of curriculum research are influenced by sociopolitical forces are examined. Intended as a means of raising the level of professional consciousness and giving practical guidance to curriculum developers, the paper discusses the relationship of prejudice, bias, and self-reference to educational and scientific research. Section I describes the theorem of natural selection in professional practices which encourages professionals, such as curriculum designers, to adopt role behaviors appropriate to their favored social status. Section II presents information on selecting the set of practices within a given profession which will be most acceptable to the dominant class. The conclusion is that curriculum researchers and designers must reject the dominant class influence and consciously choose those curricular practices which will enable pupils to liberate themselves from oppressive sociopolitical influences. Suggestions for further research include: (1) investigation of how the remedial reading and testing movement replaced progressive ideas in curriculum research and practice, (2) identification of psychologically effective and politically feasible alternatives within the existing school framework, and (3) extension of educational efforts outside the school. (Author/DB)

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Notes for a Sermon on Sociopolitical Influence on the Curriculum and on Curriculum Research*

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I. Ultimate Ground of Agreement Uniting Preacher with Congregation

Like any sermon, this one presupposes an ultimate ground of agreement. Among us, that ground of agreement may be called our theory of the world, (OTOTW), to borrow the expression as used by the philosopher-logician-scientist, Willard V. O. Quine (Quine, 1974; McClellan & Costello, 1976; McClellan, 1977). We may be in disagreement about what statements belong in our theory of the world; you say P and I say ~~not~~ P. But our theory of the world contains rules for deciding the (probable) truth value of P; our disagreement makes sense only because we share the same theory, at rock bottom, the scientific theory of the world. It's that background theory which enables us to read The Scientific American and to understand what we can or research in all branches of science. Standing in the tradition of American pragmatism, Quine holds that philosophy is an humble but essential activity within science rather than a privileged external vantage point from which to criticize science. So say we all, or so I shall presuppose in the remainder of this sermon.

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Since the ultimate ground of agreement in this congregation is an ever-growing and changing theory of the world, "ultimate" is a relative term. Right now, OTOTW is relatively stable and well-filled-out in some of its branches and quite puzzling and uncertain in others. But in no detail is it so

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fixed that it could not be shaken. Like Dewey, Quine eschews absolutes - absolutely.

But Quine's special significance for us lies in his opening the reflexive dimension of OTOTW - "If OTOTW is true, how could we have come upon it?" Quine invites us to confront the paradox of self-reference head-on and thus to understand our work as scientists from within our scientific theory. It is in conformity to that conception of science that the remainder of this sermon is to be understood.

II. Theorem of Natural Selction in Professional Practices

This theorem is pretty complicated. It's rather like a theorem about bureaucratic behavior but it seems to apply even in professions that are not bureaucratically organized. It consists of two premises, one corollary, and a rule.

Premise 1: Given a society with a recognized profession (a term defined by certain boundary conditions) in charge of a specific social function (obviously a theory-dependent concept), the cultural tradition of that society will include a set of available practices large enough to enable that social function to be performed in a number of different ways, each of which will be technically adequate to that social function, where "technically adequate" is defined relative to the overall technological level of the culture and the demographic history and potential of the society in question. For example, by the time we decided to make "curriculum" (design, research, etc.) the name of

a profession, there were lots of different, all technically adequate, ways of organizing the instruction of the young.

Premise 2: Given a society, S, which falls in the domain of Premise 1, the practices actually followed by any profession in S will not form a random distribution from among the larger set of available practices. Rather, for any profession, the distribution of practices actually followed, P_A, will be skewed toward a preferred pattern, P_1, where P_1 is the pattern which will most benefit the particular class which is dominant in the sociopolitical structure of S. Skewing toward P_1 is, I suspect, subject to historical delays--the sort of thing we used to call cultural lag--and to perturbations caused by a particular profession's gaining a vested interest in a deviant pattern and also enough political power within the dominant class to resist moving toward P_1. Over time, however, lags and perturbations give way, the maintenance of the dominant class as a whole prevails, and P_A approaches P_1. The mathematics of this sort of analysis goes quickly beyond my competence; patterns of distribution of practices can be treated, I should guess, as overlapping regions in n-dimensional space, having a quantifiable measure of fit. If that guess is wrong, I'm sure that our colleagues in research design have other mathematical analysis that will do the job.

(Thought: the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was seen by Chairman Mao as an effort to make the P_A of Chinese higher education better fit a P_1 in which workers

are the preferred class.)

Corollary to Premise 2: Any new practice will gain acceptance and increased use to the extent that its inclusion in P_A tends to make P_A a closer fit to P_1. (Can we reanalyze the data which produced the familiar J - curves on innovation and assimilation to test this corollary?)

The Cardinal Rule of Social Class Obligation for Professionals

When a specific social function is given over to a profession, the members of that profession expect and are expected to adopt the role behavior appropriate to their favored status. To the extent that any given professional succeeds in behaving appropriately, he/she will follow R_1, which expressed an ordinarily unexpressed principle, one of those things just "understood" among gentlemen.

R_1: When the set of practices available for performing the social function delegated to this profession contains two or more subsets, each of which is technically adequate to the social function, always choose that sub-set which does most to maintain the position of the dominant class, unless there are overwhelming arguments, transcending class struggle, for choosing some other sub-set.

R_1 has a status similar to the "fundamental psychological factors" that John Maynard Keynes built into his General Theory of Employment, Interest & Money (1936). No given agent need ever have thought about R_1, but if the class structure of S is reasonably intact, those agents who

move into positions where they most affect P_A will be those whose actions most conform to R_1. Just as within a market economy those entrepreneurs whose investments of capital produce the greatest profits will be those who, over time, have the most capital to invest; and thus market indicators approximate the curves which would be expected if everyone were trying to maximize profits. So also do the actual practices of a profession, P_A, approach the pattern P_1, preferred from the point of view of the dominant social class when R_1 is followed, with varying degrees of success, by individual professionals.

Those are the major elements in the Theorem of Natural Selection in Professional Practices. This theorem explains the dominant sociopolitical influences on curriculum and curriculum research, but only when it is filled out in detail. For example, at a certain point it becomes very difficult to determine P_1, i.e. to determine just what set of practices in a given profession is to be preferred from the point of view of maintaining the dominant class. And thus arises--possibly first with FDR's "Brain Trust"--a new profession to advise the dominant class of its interest. In the Pub Ed Biz, that new profession is called 'policy research.'

III. Theorem of NSPP Applied to Curriculum & Curriculum Research

Argument:

1. The dominant class in this country today is in serious trouble.

2. The pattern of curriculum and research practices which benefits the dominant class is despicable.

3. At this juncture in history, we are obligated to avail ourselves of the "unless" clause in R_1 and to act resolutely against the dominant class.

1. When I use the expression "dominant class" I don't mean high SES, i.e. some stratum or strata as defined by a set of socio-economic indicators. I mean a class defined by ownership of and control of access to the means of production; that class is distinguished from those whose only access to socially significant work is through jobs, i.e. through selling their labor as a commodity at the market price for wages. In the evolution of capitalism, the dominant class has become entangled in monopolistic cartels and imperialism, with no precise boundaries - national or corporate. But the class character of economic control becomes ever clearer as ownership of the means of production becomes concentrated in an ever smaller number of interlocking multinational corporations.

And that class is in serious trouble. Let me speak only to the internal problems it faces. We the people of this nation are, in principle, sovereign. We rightly demand of the dominant class that it manage the productive resources of this bountiful land so as to achieve at least the following goals: to provide meaningful work and a decent level of material goods for every citizen, to overcome racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination at home, to use the enormous power of the U.S. Government as a force for peace and

progress abroad, and to establish a reasonable harmony between human needs and wants and the capacity of the natural environment to meet those needs and wants.

But in point of fact, those goals cannot be achieved without some very basic changes in our economic system, as every economist from Milton Friedman on up would agree. When an economic system cannot satisfy the legitimate demands that a society places on it, the dominant class in that society is threatened. And when a dominant class, especially one still holding such awesome power as ours, is threatened, there's likely to be trouble all around.

2. What curriculum would benefit the dominant class?

Objectively speaking, the dominance of the capitalist class in this country would be less threatened if the entire working force of the nation could be turned into a mass of cheap, docile, self-replacing robots. To the degree that jobs can be "rationalized," i.e. so structured that it takes little or no thought to perform them, robots require minimal intelligence - and that's a necessity in a design which requires that they be cheap and docile. (Braverman, 1974) Subjectively speaking, would our capitalist class be willing to use its still terrible power, its control over a breath-taking panoply of physical and social technology, to turn the American people into a nation of robots? You need have no fear that moral compunctions will restrain them. We have as yet seen only the first steps in the total transformation which they must strive to achieve.

Without mentioning all the other resources available to the dominant class, let me speak directly to one of its primary tools for transforming people into robots - I refer to compulsory schooling. Even more directly, to the curriculum, especially the hidden curriculum in compulsory schooling. What is the hidden curriculum? Immanuel Kant caught the essence of it nearly two hundred years ago when he wrote: "Children are first sent to school, not so much with the object of their learning something, but rather that they may become used to sitting still and doing exactly as they are told." (1960, p. 3) More recently, Jane Martin (1976) has analyzed the hidden curriculum more carefully, revealing that children are learning a whole array of beliefs, skills, and dispositions in the process of becoming "used to sitting still and doing exactly as they are told." In fact, a wealth of fine work has come forth in the past few years, to take the bare fact so succinctly expressed by Kant and to show its significance for the class struggle. That recent literature is, among other things, a testament to the spirit of certain revolutionaries of the 60's who remained so while becoming recognized masters of their various academic crafts. (E.g. Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Carnoy, 1972; Carnoy & Levin, 1976; Spring, 1975 - among many others.)

3. What does all this mean for us?

It is in the interest of the capitalist class, but not in the interest of the people, that children grow into

docile workers who place such a low value on their own intelligence that they are willing to let others do their thinking for them, workers who can be satisfied with the debased pleasures of mass consumption, including a debased sexuality resulting in more children whom they will (often unwillingly) fashion into their own image. Now, given the Theorem of NSPP, those professionals who make decisions affecting the curriculum, especially the hidden curriculum, will act to bring it about that children on the whole come to acquire the beliefs, skills, and dispositions of docile workers. It is beneficial to the dominant class that, for example, every child learns (i.e. comes to believe) that authority can never be understood in any rational way but must be obeyed nonetheless, that every child learns, as a survival skill, how to stifle the rage which oppression creates in the human soul, or else learns how to express that rage in competitive struggle against his or her peers, that every child learns to obey--the clock, the instructional manual, the workbook, the programmed text--despite the dictates of his/her own feelings, desires, or aspirations. And so on. And, sure enough, the hidden curriculum in compulsory schooling increasingly has those effects on the lives of children.

Please recall, now, Rule 1, which I shall re-state so that it serves as both a testable hypothesis and a reasonable guide to prudential conduct. When a professional in curriculum (research, design, whatever) makes decisions

which affect socially significant learning outcomes in children, that professional will choose those practices which enhance the control of the dominant class, unless that professional believes that there are overwhelming reasons against that choice, reasons that transcend the class conflict in that society.

Thus stated, Rule 1 is reflexive: the researcher who hypothesizes that the behavior of others can be understood as flowing from that rule can and should consciously guide his/her own actions by that same rule. The great insight of critical philosophy now seeping into this country from Europe is that no hypothesis in social science is worth one moment's research unless it first explains the behavior of the researcher. (Habermas, 1972)

If Rule 1 sounds very conservative, so be it. A decent conservatism is incumbent on all professionals, especially those who would devote their lives to the deliberate education of the young. To be a professional is to accept the house rules: ties and near-ties go to the status quo.

But, as you may have surmised, I believe that we stand today at a historical juncture such that if we are to respect the traditions of our craft and our obligations to the human race, we must reject the dominant class, we must take our stand on the "unless" clause, which means that we must consciously choose those curricular practices which will enable children and youths to liberate themselves from increasingly oppressive sociopolitical influences.

May I close by suggesting some lines of research that may help to raise our level of professional consciousness and other lines that may help to give us practical guidance once we have taken our stand on the "unless" clause in Rule 1. We want to know, first, exactly how the humane and liberating spirit of Progressive Education has been stamped out of curriculum practice and research; exactly how the testing movement, remedial reading, systems design, vicious behaviorism (McClellan, 1976), and other such repressive practices crept in to replace the progressive ideas which were dominant when the post-WWII efflorescence of American education began. I tend to believe that that line of research will show that it was <u>our</u> ignorance of the class conflict, <u>our</u> failure to understand the theorem of natural selection in professional practice, <u>our</u> lack of consciousness in acting on Rule 1 which caused us to betray our deeper ideals. We must socio-analyze our own history if we are to cease being unconscious victims of it.

A second line of research must focus on psychologically effective and politically feasible alternatives within the existing school framework. Martin (1976) has suggested several promising leads. How can we help harrassed, overworked teachers to become conscious of the hidden curriculum which shapes the behavior of both teacner and student in the classroom? How can we help supervisors and administrators learn how to organize the teachers with whom they work into cooperative consciousness-raising groups? Above all, how

can we help children to learn the skills of collective self-defense such that they can protect themselves from the spiritually destructive repression which will otherwise be their inescapable destiny? We do not know the answer to those questions. I fear that we will not find those answers so long as curriculum research moves along its present path. A radical re-direction is needed. I wish to God that I had seen all this when I prepared my contribution to the NSSE volume ertitled Philosophical Re-Directions of Educational Research!

A third line of research must help us learn how to extend our educational (now carefully distinguished from training, conditioning, indoctrinational) efforts outside the school and into those other social mechanisms through which the dominant class controls the rest of society. What do children come to want and to believe as a consequence of their bombardment by TV commercials? What is the hidden curriculum in, say, the quadriennial madness known as a presidential campaign? Closer to home, what is the hidden curriculum in a course in child development given within a "research-oriented" department of educational psychology? Or in the system, aptly so-named, of criminal justice? Above all, let us devote our research efforts toward finding ways, practically effective and politically feasible ways, of making that hidden curriculum the direct object of collective study by those who are otherwise its helpless victims.

And let us do all those things quickly, for our ability to do them depends on the protection of civil and academic freedoms already under attack on many fronts. Our era can no longer be called post-WWII, post-industrial, post-anything. It is now pre-something; and pre-what will be determined, at least in part, by our response to the sociopolitical influences upon us.

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